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THE COLOR QUESTION.

A LETTER

WRITTEN FOR THE

SIXTIETH ANNUAL MEETING

OF THE

AMERICAN COLONIZATION SOCIETY,

Washington, D. C., January 16, 1877,

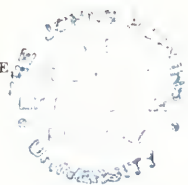
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THE COLOR QUESTION IN THE UNITED STATES.

LOUISVILLE, KY., *January 11, 1877.*

HON. PETER PARKER, *Washington City.*

MY DEAR SIR: I have heretofore expressed to Mr. Coppinger and yourself my regret that I cannot, in compliance with the wishes of the Executive Committee of the American Colonization Society, make an address at the approaching Annual Meeting. I have now the pleasure of your note of December 1, 1876, asking me to prepare a paper for the use of the Committee, showing "the influence of the benevolent operations of the Society on the state of things in this country." Herewith I submit to your consideration a few thoughts on this subject, to be used at your discretion.

It is frequently said that, although the slavery question in this country is settled, the color question has not been touched. Indeed the extirpation of slavery has introduced new and perplexing conditions into the problem. Before the law the colored man is the equal of the white man. His rights of property are acknowledged. The ballot-box is open to him. He is eligible to office, even the highest in every State and in the General Government. He may remove at his own pleasure from any one State to any other, and acquire citizenship wherever he goes upon the terms prescribed to the whites. His right of trial by jury is secured. No discrimination is made against him in the law of marriage and divorce, in the conditions imposed on the relations of the sexes, in the law of wills and testaments, or in the punishments awarded on conviction of crime; he may be whipped, or imprisoned, or put to death in no other way than if he were a white man. These immense changes in his civil relations do not render more simple or manageable the problem of the colored race; they add to its complications. The process by which the slave has been written the citizen has not changed his present social relations, nor is there in this process any promise of such a change hereafter. The controlling fact is that the overwhelming majority, eight out of nine, of our people are white; the ninth is black. The people who bear the color stain have been everywhere and always, in this country, the inferior, and for the most part the servile race.

It may be useful just now to put to the test of common sense some of the more plausible answers to the question, What shall be done

with the freedman? For the first, it has been thought that they might be concentrated upon the Gulf States, all the whites leaving those States and all the blacks going thither from the other parts of the country. But there is not in the history of mankind an example of such a movement of populations; nor, if there were such examples, is there any reason to suppose that this thing could be done here. The Gulf States include some of the choicest cotton-lands on the face of the earth, together with the only sugar-producing region in the country. These States hold, also, the mouths of the river Mississippi, with its widest and deepest channels. Does anybody believe that the whites now in possession will abandon that vast and fertile region to the blacks, surrendering to them, in the bargain, the control of the navigation of the great river? Again, the history of the Indian reservations shows that the whites are not in the habit of acknowledging the rights of an inferior race. A struggle is at this moment going on for the ownership of the Black Hills. They have been ceded to the Indians by solemn treaty. The red man is in possession, and his title is protected by the military power of the United States; but neither the ferocity of the Sioux warriors within the territory, nor the vigilance of the national troops posted on its borders, can keep off the miners and speculators. A people who mean at all hazards to rob the Indians of their reservations are not likely to pull up stakes and abandon to the colored race the fertile shores of the Southern Gulf. They have just now built Deadwood City among the snows and bad lands of the Black Hills. They will hardly move away from Mobile and New Orleans, and from the four or five neighboring States, for the accommodation of the freedmen.

A second solution of the problem has been proposed. It is difficult to state or to examine a proposition than which nothing could be more unreasonable or revolting. I refer to the amalgamation of the white and black races through unrestrained intermarriage. It would be a reproach to the intelligence of the colored race to intimate the existence of any expectation among them to that effect. The probabilities of its occurrence are not suggested by any historical analogies: not by the fusion of the citizens and helots of Sparta, or of the Roman masters and their slaves, or of the free-born Russians and their serfs. In all those instances the superior and inferior races were of the same color and of the same general stock. Not one of them touches the question how to obliterate the color-line which divides forty millions from five millions, the first made up chiefly of Anglo-Saxons, and the last of Africans, the Africans long held in

slavery, and now laboring under the stain of color not only, but the prejudice of caste as well. Nor is there anything in the condition of the mixed breeds in Mexico, or in the amalgamation which is said to be now going forward in the West India Islands, to warrant the thought that universal miscegenation in this country is among the possibilities of the future. This method of solving the problem may be discarded without further argument.

A third solution may be obtained by our agreeing to abide by the present posture of affairs. It might be urged that the whites and the blacks are now living together. The one is the superior and the other is the inferior race. Both parties are now getting along after a fashion. Let the subject rest there. This is a plausible suggestion. For, first, this settlement of the question saves the trouble of study and discussion on the most difficult branch of social science. Next, this is an established element in American society; and whatever is now, and has long been, the settled order of things holds a position from which it is not easily dislodged. Further, the colored people are satisfied with their homes in this country, and the most of them resent any attempt to remove them. Their recent liberation and enfranchisement, procured and guaranteed by constitutional amendments, have strengthened their attachment to what they proudly call their native land. They are the equals of the whites before the law. No other disability disturbs them except their social inferiority; and this they are willing to endure, partly because they have become accustomed to it, and partly because they hope, though the whites think, against hope, for better things. And further still, the whites "accept the situation," because they do not see that it is possible to change it; and because the presence of the blacks, as laborers, is a convenience in the northern portion of the former Slave States, and a supposed necessity in the Gulf States.

Here we come upon the main obstacles in the way of African Colonization. The cause has but a feeble hold on the people of either race. The blacks will not go to Africa, a few only excepted. The whites do not believe that 5,000,000 of people can be removed thither; nor are they willing to give up their old servants as a separate, inferior, and docile class of laborers and menials.

Standing face to face with all these obstacles, have we any further plea to urge in behalf of Colonization? If so, what is the nature and ground of the plea? For answer to these questions, let it be borne in mind that the freedmen are now rising apace in the scale of intelligence, self-respect, sound morality, and the religious sentiment and

life. Nothing of the kind is more remarkable than their progress in these directions. It has exceeded the hopes of their most sanguine friends. A visit to their schools, to their churches, and to the ecclesiastical meetings of the colored preachers would surprise those even who entertain the largest expectations respecting their enlightenment and elevation.

It is to be expected that the progress of education and religion among them will raise up a class of people who will demand for themselves and their children a better home than will be afforded to them here. When they were in slavery their hearts were set on emancipation. What sacrifices were made by many of them, to secure personal freedom for themselves and their children, will not be forgotten by this generation either of the former masters or servants. They are now free beyond the possibility of re-enslavement. This is the first step. Then, being freemen, they began to seek equality before the law with their white neighbors. They were taught to say: "Of what use is freedom to us, so long as we are deprived of the ordinary rights of freemen? We are refused the self-protection afforded by the ballot-box; the coveted prizes of citizenship, the inspiring rewards of good behavior are denied us; and the law, instead of recognizing our equality, inflicts upon us, and entails on our unborn children the stigma of legalized caste. Let us have the rights as well as the personal liberty of free citizens." This is the second advantage which has been sought and gained for them.

Now for the third. Having gotten their freedom and their civil rights, the wealthy and cultivated people of color will aspire to social equality. Their pride will be stung by the slights that will be put upon them, by the indignities which white people of ruder and coarser manners than they will inflict on their families, and by the polite but more freezing exclusion which the better classes of the whites will strongly enforce. They will say, "Freedom is a great gift, equality before the law is a great gift; but what are these so long as our children are not suffered in social intercourse to cross the color-line—a bar more hateful than the 'dead-line' of the military prison?" Parents might endure the stigma of inferiority for themselves, but not for their children. Could they be convinced that their descendants of a remote generation will rise to a social equality with the whites, even to the extent of intermarriage—which is and ought to be forever impossible—even then, the better classes of them will hardly feel at liberty to leave their own children to be worn out by the sufferings which they must endure in wearing out what they deem an odious

prejudice of caste, all for the sake of future generations. Men prefer the well-being of their immediate children to the comfort of unborn and remote descendants. To the most intelligent and far-seeing parents the question will surely occur, whether there is not somewhere under the sun a country where their children may at once rise to the dignity and just pride of men and women who are socially, as well as by force of law, the equals of the highest. This inquiry, which is sure to assume an urgent form, leads up to the remaining solution of the problem.

That solution is proposed by the American Colonization Society. It is busy and patient in the preparation of a home for these people which shall fulfill all the conditions of a home. It is a fact, every way remarkable, that the skies are brightening in Africa just at the time when the color question becomes more serious than ever. The hopeful signs may be easily pointed out. For the first, Liberia is entering on a new career of prosperity. It is no longer a feeble settlement, struggling for a foothold upon the edge of a continent occupied by barbarous tribes and white savages trading in slaves. It is no longer a colony, with fair prospects of success as a colony merely. It is a free Commonwealth, with a written Constitution, good laws, and an established Government. The authorities are obtaining honorable and peaceable possession of the outlying regions. Their power of self-protection against the hostile native tribes has been maintained by force of arms. The health of the climate is constantly improving. Agriculture, the source of boundless wealth, is steadily gaining ground. Churches and schools and all the allied forces of Christian civilization are in vigorous working order. To all this it must be added that the citizens of the new Republic are all colored people; the white man being forever disfranchised by an express provision of the Constitution. Such is the home which is to-day offered to so many of our colored people as are looking for another country better than America for themselves and their children.

And further still, the world is beginning to find out that Western Africa is only a narrow and low-lying border of a great continent. It required nearly a hundred years after the settlement of Jamestown and Plymouth for our fathers to ascertain that the strip of country between the Atlantic and the Alleghanies was not North America, but only a thoroughfare to the heart of the continent in the valley of the Mississippi. That vast central region has drawn to itself emigrants from other countries which may be counted by millions.

Recent discoveries in Africa are not less surprising. From Liberia

on the Western Coast to Abyssinia on the Eastern, the breadth of the continent is four thousand miles—one thousand more than the distance from New York to San Francisco. The surface of Africa is not less diversified than the surface of America. There are low lands and high lands, jungles and sandy plains, mangrove swamps, and mountains the tops of which are covered with snow. There are basins for inland seas and channels for mighty rivers. Lieutenant Cameron informs us by his personal observation that “most of the land from the Tanganyika to the Western Coast is of almost unspeakable richness. There are metals—iron, copper, silver, and gold; coal also exists; vegetable products, palm-oil, nutmegs, cotton, several sorts of pepper and coffee, all growing wild. The Arabs have introduced rice, wheat, onions, and a few fruit-trees, all of which seem to flourish well.” There are other indications of the immense resources of interior Africa. Within a short journey from Liberia a group of kingdoms may be found, some of which have been in existence for more than a thousand years. These contain wide districts of fertile soil, producing cotton, rice, and corn. The air is cool and sweet, and the region is by nature every way inviting. Now the discoveries already made and to be made hereafter in Africa may be expected to invite an immense emigration. The question has been often put us by the colored people, “If Africa is so good a country why do not the white people go there themselves?” This question may receive an unexpected reply. Stranger things have happened in the migrations of the human family than the settlement of large districts of Africa by the white races, and by the return thither of immense numbers of its own now exiled children. These last will be in a condition to choose, not only between this country and Liberia, but between this country and the most attractive regions of New Africa. And further, it is reasonable to anticipate that the impulse of emigration, having once taken possession of these people, will lead to their voluntary colonization in regions within easy reach of this country. Jamaica, Porto Rico, Hayti, San Domingo, Cuba, or the South American States may invite the intelligent and enterprising colored people of a new generation to found free commonwealths within their domains. A race resolved on seeking a new home will find or make one for themselves.

Migration makes up one of the most wonderful chapters in the history of the world. We find near at hand an illustration of the power of this movement. It is said that within a quarter of a century (1848–1873) over five millions of foreigners have been landed in New York alone, in numbers equal to the entire colored popula-

tion of the United States. Some of the forces that instigate and secure migration are oppression, poverty, civil inequality, bad land laws and labor systems, social disabilities, dissatisfaction with the old and the attractiveness of new homes. The motives now known or unknown which will stimulate the voluntary removal of the colored race to other lands may, within our second century, go very far towards solving the problem. And it may turn out that the greatest work of our Society is the suggestion of colonization in foreign lands, together with a demonstration in Liberia of its feasibility, as a cure for the evils which now afflict the white no less than the black races.

Such is the solution which our Society applies to the problem. We are not entitled to say that it will be actually solved in this way. The thoughts of the Almighty are higher than our thoughts and His ways are higher than our ways, higher than the heavens are above the earth. He is accustomed to accomplish His gracious purposes by methods which no human sagacity can divine. But we are entitled to say that our plan is the best plan yet suggested for the future elevation of the colored race. We are not at liberty to discard this scheme until a better is proposed; and if there be a better, the vigorous prosecution of this may lead us on to that.

Our Society is the only body of men in existence organized solely for the benefit of the colored peoples here and in Africa. The American Anti-Slavery Society labored for the emancipation of the slaves, but it contemplated nothing beyond that. On the adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Federal Constitution the Society adjourned without day. It did not even attempt to perpetuate and strengthen itself to grapple with the question, What shall be done with the freedman? That question was the unavoidable sequence of their emancipation and enfranchisement. *It is a question which everybody foresaw would arise and must be met; a question which may convulse the nation, and may in its settlement change the face of the world.* Instead of meeting this great crisis in the affairs of two races and two continents, all the anti-slavery Societies went suddenly into dissolution; but the crisis itself with all the problems which it involves survives these extinct associations. The color question must be met; the sooner the better. If we allow things to take their course, the two races remaining as they now are, together and not together, the history of other countries may, perchance, repeat itself here in the gradual decay and final extinction of the weaker under the shadow of the stronger. We would shut our eyes upon any solution of the problem, which is unworthy of a humane and Christian people. As to a war of races, perish the thought!

Now, the Colonization Society, standing alone in this work, is bound to hold on its way for the sake of the country agitated with troubles growing out of the color question, for the sake of the freedmen for whom the Society has faithfully labored through the period of sixty years, for the sake of Christian missions in Africa, and for the sake of humanity and the welfare of the human race, which are all the time in peril. Hitherto God has helped the Society. He will not leave it in doubt concerning what other and greater works He will require at its hands.

For the rest, let the friends of this Society continue to study the elevation and happiness of the colored people. Let us foster their churches and schools of common and higher learning. Let us help them in their efforts towards self-respect, refinement, and true religion. Let us show that we are too faithful in our friendship to advise them to struggle for social equality here, and faithful enough to provide for them a new home in Africa, where they may found free Christian commonwealths for themselves and give the Gospel to a great continent.

Very truly, yours,

EDW. P. HUMPHREY.

